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WAR ON THE VELD

British, Zulus and Boers at Each Others' Throats

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Consultants D. K. Fieldhouse, Lecturer in Commonwealth History and Fellow of Nuffield College, Oxford
A. F. Madden, Reader in Commonwealth Government and Fellow of Nuffield College, Oxford

DONALD MORRIS is the author of *The Washing of the Spears*, a definitive account of the rise and fall of the Zulu nation.

BRIAN GARDNER has written many historical works. Among the best known are *The Big Push*, on the battle of the Somme; *Mafeking* and *The Lion's Cage*, both on the Boer War; and *The African Dream*.

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BY THE WAY

Donald Morris describes Shaka, the huge, vicious warrior who established the Zulu war machine and founded the Zulu empire, as a "latent homosexual," and certainly the excesses in which he indulged demand some such explanation.

The full extent of his psychotic personality appeared when his mother, Nandi died. Though not strictly speaking part of imperial history, the events that followed reveal both his character and his power. This description of the tribe's reaction to Shaka's grief, quoted in Morris's book *The Washing of the Spears*, was provided by an Englishman, Henry Fynn, an early settler in Natal: "The chiefs and people, to the number of about fifteen thousand, commenced the most dismal and horrid lamentations. . . . Through the whole night it continued, none daring to rest or refresh themselves with water; while at short intervals, fresh outbursts were heard as more distant regiments approached. . . . Before noon the number had increased to about sixty thousand. . . . At noon the whole force formed a circle with Shaka in the centre, and sang a warsong. . . . At the close of it, Shaka ordered several men to be executed on the spot. . . . Those who could no more force tears from their eyes were beaten to death by others who were mad with excitement. Towards the afternoon I calculated that not fewer than seven thousand people had fallen in this frightful indiscriminate massacre."

Nandi was buried three days later. Ten handmaidens, their arms and legs broken to prevent them escaping, were buried alive with her to keep her company. Shaka then set maniacal conditions for mourning: for a year, no crops were to be planted, all milk was to be poured on the ground and any woman who became pregnant was to be slain, together with her husband. As it happened, after three months one bold warrior pointed out that this orgy of destruction was driving the nation towards starvation. Shaka ended the mourning, but – hardly surprisingly – he was murdered the following year.

All letters please to: **The British Empire, 76, Oxford Street, London W.1.**

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Cover: The remnants of part of the British army that invaded Zululand in 1879 make a last stand at Isandhlwana before being overwhelmed by Zulu warriors.

WAR ON THE VELD

In the late 1870s, Britain set out to impose peace on southern Africa, unsettled by perpetual clashes between whites and blacks. Two nations posed particular problems: the Transvaal Boers and their traditional enemies, the Zulus. At first, both seemed incapable of challenging the British decision. The Transvaal, poverty stricken, was annexed with deceptive ease in 1877. The Zulus were dismissed as savages and, it was thought, would offer no resistance.

Yet in the space of two years, the British suffered devastating humiliations at the hands of both nations. The Zulu regiments were victorious at Isandhlwana in 1879, and, ironically, the vengeance rapidly exacted by the British removed the Zulu threat to the Boers and paved the way for further disaster. At Majuba Hill in 1881, sharp-shooting Boers routed a British force and regained their independence.

By Donald Morris

The sun, rising over the green hills of Zululand on a late January morning in 1879, illuminated the crest of a strange, sphinx-shaped hill called Isandhlwana. As the shadowline receded to the lower slopes, the light exposed the ruin of what less than a day before had been a bustling military camp. The sooty white smear across the base of the hill resolved itself into the charred remnants of hundreds of tents, flanked by a looted jumble of splintered wagons. Almost 1,000 oxen, mules and horses lay stiffening in the wreck of the wagon park, and in and about the carnage, scattered in sprawling clumps through the tentage and the wagons and lying in bloody rows below them, were the bodies of close to 1,400 soldiers.

Close to 500 of the bodies were natives, clad only in loincloths, with the red rag that distinguished the Natal Native Contingent wrapped round their heads. Mingled with them in death lay a few of their Zulu enemies, still clutching their great rawhide shields and their broad-bladed, short-hafted stabbing spears. Some 2,000 Zulus had died in the battle, but most of the bodies had been dragged away by their tribesmen.

The British army had gone into Zululand to protect the Boer and British inhabitants of South Africa against the supposed threat posed by the warrior Zulu nation. That threat seemed now to have materialized, and the defeat had to be revenged. Within months, it was. The Zulus, the most powerful native empire ever to arise in southern Africa, were to be destroyed, Natal, Cape Colony and the Boer nation of the Transvaal, newly annexed by Britain, made safe.

But peace in South Africa, with its tangled web of shallow allegiances and underlying antagonisms, could not be settled that simply. With the Zulu menace destroyed, the Boers, already embittered against the expansionist British, were within a year to allow their feelings full reign in a hard-fought war of independence – the conflict that is often known as the "First Boer War," a curtain-raiser to the much greater clash 20 years later.

A century before, such bloody and complex developments would have seemed strange indeed. Then, there had been no British, and the Boers dominated the Cape unchallenged by any ambitious native kingdoms. The Zulus had been just one of the 800 or so small clans that shared the rolling lowlands between the Drakensberg Mountains and the sea.

In about 1786, however, a man was born whose military prowess was to change the face of southern Africa. Senzangakona, the Chief of the Zulus, fathered an illegitimate son, Shaka, by a woman named Nandi, of a neighbouring clan, the eLangeni. Nandi and Shaka were shunted between Zulu and eLangeni and reviled by both tribes alike.

Shaka's military career began when a neighbouring chieftain, Dingiswayo, to whom the Zulus owed allegiance, took Shaka into his army. When Senzangakona died in 1816, Dingiswayo lent Shaka a regiment and sent him upcountry to reign over the Zulus. With his arrival, the Zulus commenced their march to greatness, a subject also covered in Issue 18, *The Struggle for the Cape*.

British cavalrymen and Xhosa warriors clash in one of the many "Kaffir Wars" that marked Cape Colony's inexorable push northwards.

Commanders of British and native forces discuss a boundary dispute in 1846. The talks failed and the seventh Kaffir War began.

Previously the Zulus, like all Bantu tribes, had fought in formless crowds, armed with unwieldy throwing assegais (spears). Shaka set about reorganizing the Zulus. He formed regiments, made military service compulsory and rearmed his warriors with short, stabbing assegais. These were used from behind a shield, and required hand-to-hand combat.

His battle tactics finally provided him with the most effective war machine yet seen in southern Africa. His *impi* (army) was divided into four main groups. A central group, called the "chest," first engaged the enemy. Then two "horns" raced out from each side to attack the foe from the rear. Reserves, known as "loins," sat near by – with their backs to the battle to prevent them becoming over-excited – ready to be thrown in as the tide of fighting required.

Shaka also ensured aggressiveness in his soldiers by ordering them to remain celibate for a lengthy period.

The reasons for Shaka's ambition and for the peculiarly vicious system he introduced lie in his own character. It seems likely that his rejection by society and his dependence on his mother had turned him into an embittered homosexual. He never married, and, although he gathered a vast harem of 1,200 women, this was solely a means of boosting his own power: he never fathered a child, referred to his women as "sisters" and slew any of them who became pregnant.

Shaka's army brought him rapid success. He first attacked neighbouring clans and incorporated their surviving warriors into his own regiments. Within a few years, his empire included most of present-day Natal.

His successes brought chaos to the area. Waves of refugees fled the devastation caused by his rise to power, crowding south towards Cape Colony. Ninepin-fashion, the tribal structure in surrounding areas collapsed as clans of Bantu struggled for existence in new areas. In this period in the early 1820s, known as the "Mfecane" – the "crushing" – some two million Bantu died.

These events intensified what had become an apparently insoluble problem further south: the clashes between Cape Colonists and Bantu tribes on the vaguely defined frontier of Cape Colony and the native area to its north-east known as "Kaffraria," the land of the "Kaffirs." (This Arabic word for "infidel" was the term, now disparaging, applied by early Europeans to the Bantus as a whole.)

Competition for land, between Bantus and settlers advancing north, had already by 1820 led to five of a series of border wars – known variously as Kaffir Wars, Frontier Wars or, to modern African writers, Wars of Dispossession – that only ended when all the tribal areas were incorporated into Cape Colony towards the end of the century.

By the late 1820s, however, the whirlwind that had begun the "crushing" blew itself out. The dread adoration that Shaka once commanded had become rule by sheer terror. The young men and women of the tribe, deprived of each others' company, grew bitter. Shaka grew openly psychotic: once, to gratify a passing interest in embryology, he sliced open a hundred pregnant women. Finally, his own brothers combined to stab him to death.

His murder ended ten years of inter-tribal strife. Though the Great Trek of the 1830s (when the Cape Boers fled away from British rule into the interior) led to a brief though legendary round of massacre and revenge by Boers and

This Victorian cartoon shows Cetshwayo being incited to violence by the Russian bear, the pet bogeyman of 19th-Century Britain.

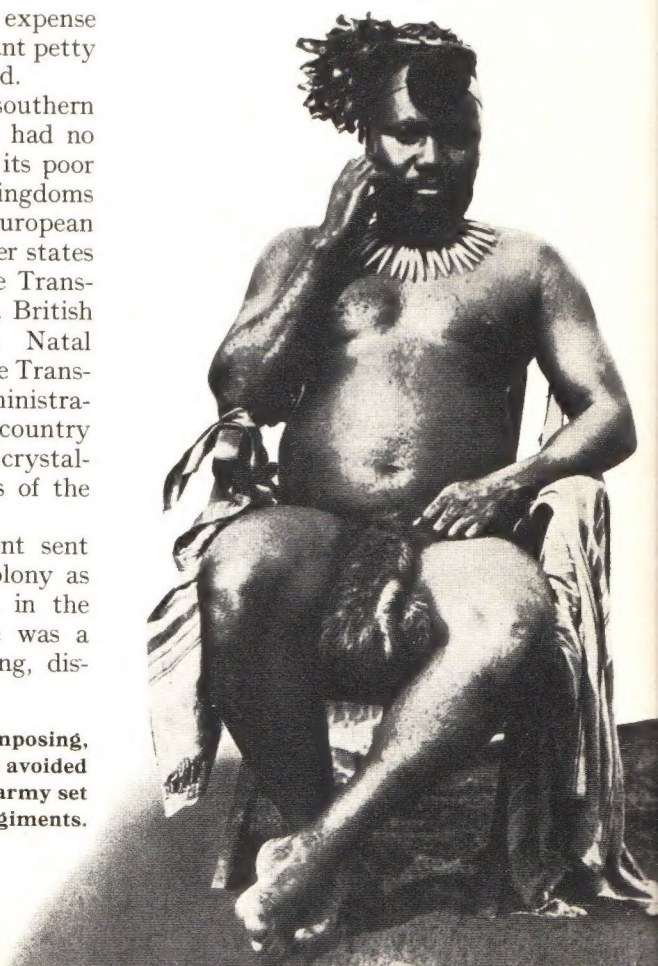
Zulus, the Zulus remained at peace thereafter for another 40 years under Shaka's successors, Dingaan and Mpande.

Then in 1872 Mpande died and was replaced by his intelligent and forebearing son, Cetshwayo. Cetshwayo had no territorial ambitions, nor was he threatened by his neighbours, but he was deeply imbued with the glories of the Shaka period: he maintained the Zulu army of 40,000 warriors, without realizing the deep unease the army and his own truculent pronouncements generated among his European neighbours.

This was one element in the conflicts between Boers, British and Zulus that arose in the 1870s. The fuse that led to war was lit by Britain. The concept of a South African confederation was attracting the interest of the British government. By consolidating the ill-assorted clutch of colonies, Boer states, native kingdoms and territories into one cohesive dominion, the British believed that the expense of administration and the incessant petty squabbling could both be reduced.

The idea found little favour in southern Africa. The stable Cape Colony had no wish to assume the expenses of its poor relations; few of the native kingdoms would willingly pass under European hegemony and neither of the Boer states – the Orange Free State and the Transvaal – was eager to submit to a British government. But in 1877 a Natal official was sent on a mission to the Transvaal, found the feeble Boer administration bankrupt and annexed the country to the Crown. This move simply crystallized the anti-British sentiments of the Transvaal Boers.

The next year the government sent Sir Bartle Frere to the Cape Colony as Governor, with plenary powers in the other British possessions. Frere was a proconsul of Empire, with a long, dis-



Cetshwayo, the Zulu King, was an imposing, intelligent and popular despot who avoided war with the whites until a British army set out to destroy the ferocious Zulu regiments.

tinguished Indian career behind him, noted for his independence from London, and his willingness to assume major responsibilities. He soon decided that the major obstacle to confederation was Zulu independence, for the native peoples of all southern Africa drew a measure of defiance from the Zulu example. Frere determined to pick a preventative war with the Zulus.

Frere started by offering to negotiate a boundary dispute between the Zulus and the Transvaal Boers, hoping both to limit Zulu power and to please the Boers. To his consternation, the commission he set up very properly found in favour of the Zulus. Frere withheld this news until he had collected his troops and then, promulgated the commission's recommendation but coupled it with a totally unwarranted ultimatum that ordered Cetshwayo to disband his army.

Had Cetshwayo complied, it would in effect have meant the end of Zulu independence. Frere knew perfectly well that the terms would not be accepted – it is doubtful if Cetshwayo even understood their full import – and when the short period of grace expired, British troops entered Zululand. London was not informed of the ultimatum and did not learn of it in time to stop the invasion.

Command of the invasion was given to Frederic Thesiger, 2nd Baron Chelmsford, an intelligent, methodical officer well aware of the difficulties of his task. There was no proper target in Zululand; even the largest kraals, if burnt, could be rebuilt in a day or so, and occupying the entire country was out of the question. The only possible objectives were a smashing defeat of the Zulu army and the capture of the King himself.

The military problems, however, were rendered enormously complex by the logistical ones of attempting to convey and supply a complete army inland from the coast. Chelmsford had to shift 1,500 tons of tents, cooking utensils, food, firewood, ammunition, artillery, rocket batteries, engineering equipment and medical stores. The only way to do so was by wagons, with the army being continuously supplied by other wagons ferrying materials from bases near the coast.

The 18-foot ox-wagons spawned their own peculiar brand of problem. Even with 18 or 20 beasts hauling them, they could be stopped by small rises, sand or slight

John Dunn, a Scottish trader and confidant of Cetshwayo, was made a chief by the Zulu King and presented with land and wives.

mud. It was rare for them to average much more than five miles a day. Teams could haul for only eight hours a day, and if they did that much they had to spend several days recovering. A full wagon and its team extended 40 yards – and Chelmsford needed 600 or 700 wagons. If they travelled all at once, one behind the other – a clear impossibility – they would stretch for 20 miles.

Even to gather enough oxen together was nigh on impossible. Chelmsford had to buy, borrow or hire two-thirds of all Cape Colony's wagon teams. Prices soared. Over the weeks it took to build up supplies, pasturage deteriorated. Oxen starved, became sick, infected huge areas of ground and had to be dispersed again. Even when the campaign started in January, 1879, one-third of the transport coming in was being lost monthly. Some 27,000 oxen passed through Chelmsford's hands in all, and eventually he turned to mules in despair. Yet the actual invasion was undertaken with a combined force that totalled only 7,500 oxen and mules.

Since the Zulu army could easily cover 50 miles a day for days on end, Chelmsford could hardly chase after it. He could only hope it would attack him, so that the massed fire of his troops' modern breech-loading rifles could destroy it. The Zulus could do no harm until they had closed for hand-to-hand fighting.

At the same time Chelmsford had to defend Natal, for a Zulu *impi* might easily avoid him and slip across – at any one of a hundred points on the long, undefended frontier – to ravage the colony at will. Chelmsford therefore disposed his troops – 8,000 regular soldiers, 1,000 mounted volunteers and 7,000 natives from Natal – into three columns, which were to enter Zululand separately and converge on the royal kraal at Ulundi.

Only eight regular battalions were reliable; the mounted volunteers would be useful for scouting but packed little weight, and the Natal Native Contingent was more of a hindrance than a help. The men had simply been drafted from the reserves in Natal, and were in mortal terror of the Zulu assegais. They were officered by the poorest scrapings of the colony – clerks, construction workers, drifters – for any man of worth could afford a horse and was in a volunteer mounted unit. Few of these men spoke Zulu and most of them were filled with contempt for their troops, most of whom carried only spears.

Chelmsford hoped for a quick campaign, but this was not possible. He would have to advance from one strong camp site to the next, always ready to accept the hoped-for attack. Periodically the troops would have to wait in the camp while a slow, vulnerable ox-train moved back to the Natal border to bring up supplies. Over half of Chelmsford's force, in fact, was employed in driving and guarding the oxen and mules. What attention he could give to military concerns had to be stolen from his constant preoccupation with the commissariat.

Had Cetshwayo sent his army to invade Natal, or had he simply avoided battle, concentrating on the vulnerable supply trains, or had he ordered his warriors to run off the transport herds when they were sent out to graze at dawn, he might have secured a victory of sorts. As it was, neither Cetshwayo nor any of his *inDunas* had any idea of how to fight a war, or of the size of the power pitted against them. They had no strategy and only the "chest and the horns" for tactics. Cetshwayo could think of no plan but to assemble the entire Zulu army at Ulundi and then to launch a succession of attacks. After each assault, he intended to reassemble the regiments at Ulundi to rest and then try again – for in victory or defeat the Zulu *impi* was good for only

one blow at a time. Under this scheme, the raw courage of his warriors, his nation's only military asset, would be used until it was either victorious or broken and spent.

On January 11, Chelmsford and the Central Column forded the Buffalo River at Rorke's Drift, marked by a mission-station at which he left a small reserve force, and started along the track to Ulundi. It took ten days to cover the first eight miles: a full week was needed to pave a swampy valley with logs so that the wagons could pass.

On the 20th a new camp was established right in the shadow of Isandhlwana. Below the mountain, a broad, level plain stretched eight miles to low foothills in the east; broken country to the right fell down to the Buffalo River and, to the left, a sharp escarpment led to the Nqutu Plateau. A *donga* (a steep-sided watercourse), guarded the front of the camp. It was a strong position, close to wood and water. The terrain offered no cover under which attackers could move on the camp except from the direction of the plateau. Chelmsford scouted the plateau and then guarded it with a picket of the Natal Native Contingent posted at the head of a spur which ran from the plateau to the base of Isandhlwana.

The main Zulu *impi* had already left Ulundi and lay somewhere ahead to the east. Chelmsford planned to send out half his force – in itself more than sufficient to beat off any attack the Zulus could mount – to establish a new camp, and then to bring the other half, guarding the supplies at Isandhlwana, up to the new camp. Such "inchworm" movements slowed his progress to a crawl but they were dictated by the Zulu mobility and the need to keep the bulk of his troops in a compact mass.

On the afternoon of the 21st, Chelmsford sent out a force consisting of Major John Dartnell with 150 mounted volunteers and Commandant Rupert Lonsdale with 2,000 natives to search the foothills ahead. Dartnell ran into several hundred Zulus at dusk. Since this might have been part of the main *impi*, he sent back to Chelmsford for reinforcements, and prepared to offer battle next morning.

The message reached Chelmsford after midnight; he decided to advance his move to the new campsite and within the hour set out across the plain with six companies of regular infantry and four guns, leaving Colonel Henry Pulleine to guard the camp with six companies of the 24th Regiment plus over 100 mounted volunteers, two guns and the remaining 600 natives. Chelmsford also ordered Colonel Anthony Durnford, Royal Engineers (who outranked Pulleine) to come to Isandhlwana from Rorke's Drift, where he had been waiting with 550 native troops. Durnford moved up with his Natives, leaving 100 or so fit men – only some 90 of them European – to stand guard over the mission-station.

Pulleine was given orders to "defend the camp" until Chelmsford sent for him, and these orders would devolve on Durnford when he arrived. By sunrise Chelmsford had joined Dartnell and was searching the area for the Zulus. Chelmsford then sent back orders for the camp at Isandhlwana to be struck and for all forces to march on to join him at the new campsite he had chosen. By the time the message arrived, however, Pulleine had been overtaken by events.

A report had reached Pulleine that there were Zulus on the plateau who were retiring to the east. Durnford, newly arrived, decided to take his mounted men out across the plain to join Chelmsford. Pulleine, waiting clarification from the picket on the plateau, ordered his men to fall in on their parade grounds. This was not a fighting defensive formation, and it resulted in four of his six companies being stretched out in a sprawling line almost a mile long across the front of the camp, with gaps for the companies that had gone out with Chelmsford. The departure of two more companies, which Pulleine sent up to the plateau to support the outpost, increased the gaps.

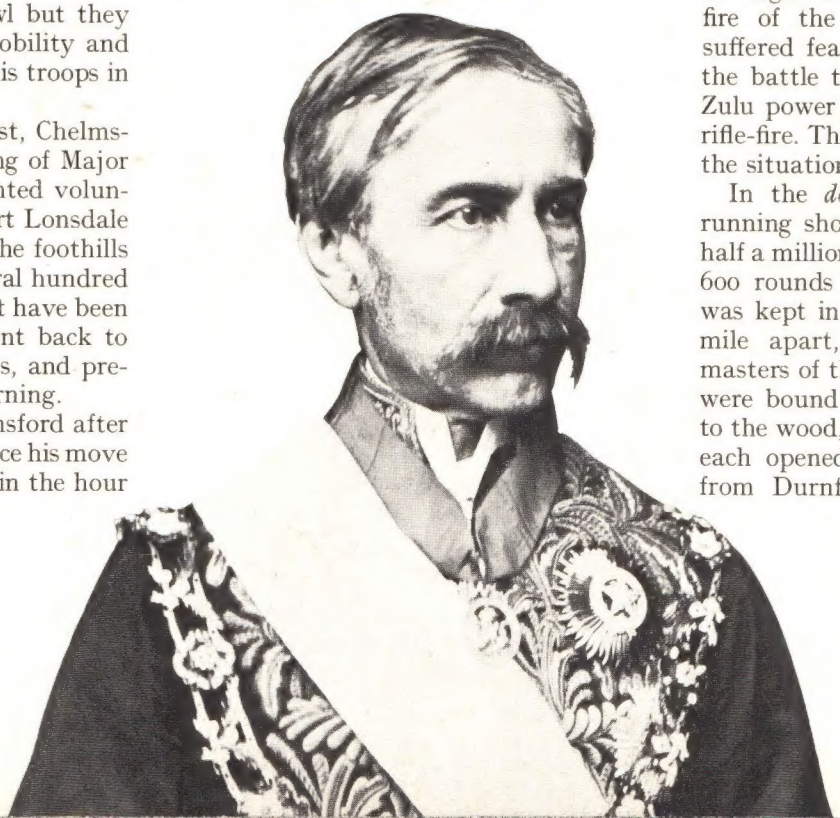
But the main Zulu *impi*, 20,000 strong, was not in the foothills ahead. It had slipped up to the plateau the previous afternoon and bedded down in a ravine five miles from the escarpment. There was a new moon due the following day, and the Zulus had planned to sit out this inauspicious time and attack on the 23rd. But when by chance a mounted scout spotted them squatting in utter silence on the ground, the Zulus came boiling out of hiding, shook themselves into order on the run and set out for the lip of the plateau. The two companies of the 24th and the Natal Native outpost just had time to retire down the spur.

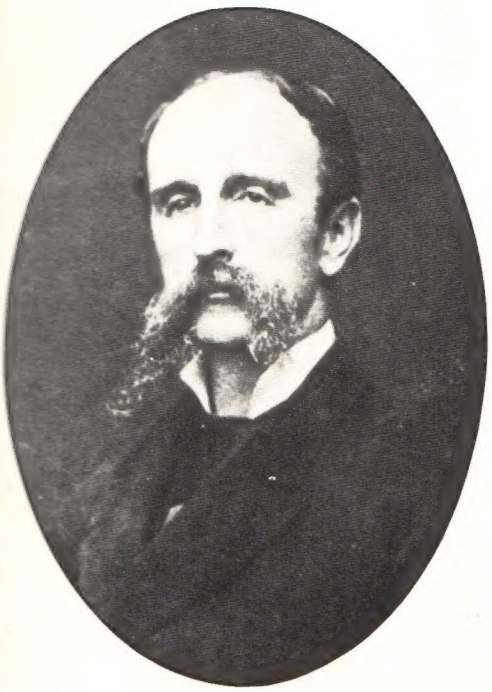
The Zulu tide reached the lip of the plateau and spilled over to the plain below. Durnford, caught in the open, wheeled his command and raced for the shelter of the *donga*, dismounting his men and opening a sharp fire on the advancing horde. Within minutes the wave of Zulus had lapped up to the British line.

Although the British were defending a large area, they were not worried; the volleys had stopped the Zulus 100 yards away and the entire mass had thrown themselves down, humming in anger like a gigantic swarm of bees, trying to edge forward against the sustained fire of the British troops. The Zulus suffered fearful losses. This was exactly the battle the British wanted, with the Zulu power immolating itself on British rifle-fire. Then, with hardly any warning, the situation changed fatally.

In the *donga*, Durnford's men were running short of cartridges. There were half a million rounds in the camp, packed 600 rounds to a box. The ammunition was kept in two wagons, a quarter of a mile apart, manned by the quartermasters of the two battalions. The boxes were bound with copper straps screwed to the wood, and the quartermasters had each opened one box. Messengers, first from Durnford then from other com-

Sir Henry Bartle Frere, Governor of the Cape, was determined to crush the "treacherous and bloodthirsty" Cetshwayo and "relieve South Africa of the Zulu incubus."





When Colonel Anthony Durnford disobeyed orders at Isandhlwana and went off on a sortie, the Zulus annihilated the weak and disorganized force he left behind.

manders, arrived for replenishment. They took time to get there: some of the men in the line were more than a mile from the wagons. Even when the messengers reached the first wagon, some of them found that they had come to the wrong place: a quartermaster of the 1st Battalion would not issue ammunition to messengers from 2nd Battalion companies, and vice versa. Neither quartermaster would issue any ammunition to Durnford's Natal Natives. The men in the line had expended the 50 rounds in their pouches, and the messengers could not keep up the supplies.

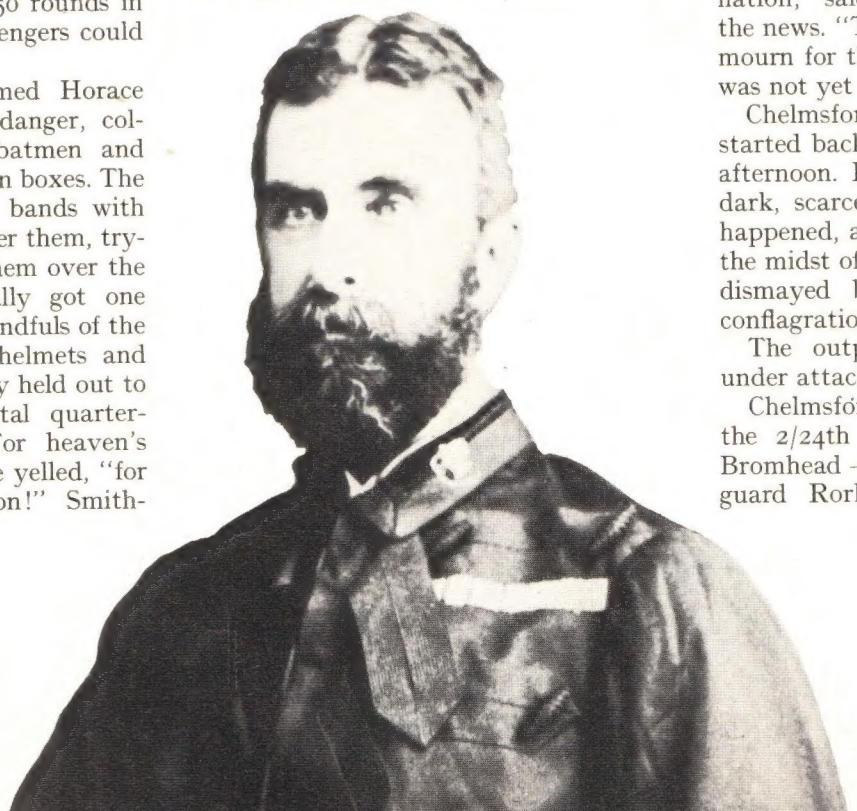
A young lieutenant named Horace Smith-Dorrien, seeing the danger, collected some grooms and batmen and began to raid the ammunition boxes. The men hacked at the copper bands with axes or thrust bayonets under them, trying to snap them or prise them over the screws. Smith-Dorrien finally got one open and began to thrust handfuls of the precious packets into the helmets and haversacks that were eagerly held out to him. One of the regimental quartermasters was horrified. "For heaven's sake don't do that man," he yelled, "for it belongs to our battalion!" Smith-Dorrien snarled back: "Hang it all, you don't want a requisition now, do you?" and continued to dole out packets.

Across the front of battle, the fire slackened for want of ammunition. The Zulus noticed the change, and one regiment leaped up, stamping their feet and rattling their assegais against their shields, shouting their warcry: "*uSuthu! uSuthu!*" The Natal Natives, panic-stricken, fled, leaving a gaping hole between the two segments of the British line. Thousands of maddened Zulus poured into the opening, taking the men from behind as the frontal attack smashed home.

Organized resistance was over in minutes, and the few survivors who rallied to Durnford for a last stand near the wagon park lasted little longer. The six companies of the 2nd Warwickshire (the South Wales Borderers, as they were to be renamed in 1881) died to a man; while several hundred staff officers, mounted volunteers, bandsmen, cooks, grooms and wagon drivers started down the broken ground to the river four miles away, with the Zulus hacking and stabbing at them as they ran. The river was in spate, and most of those who reached the bank died there or in the crossing – still known as Fugitive's Drift.

Many who escaped had remarkable tales to tell afterwards. Young Smith-Dorrien seized a free horse and rode the five miles down to the river without even being threatened. He learned later that he owed his life – as did several other officers – to the fact that he was wearing a blue patrol jacket: Cetshwayo had told his Zulu warriors to kill only the soldiers, who could be identified by their red coats. Any one else, he said, was a civilian and could be safely ignored.

Lord Chelmsford, Commander-in-Chief in Zululand, bore only indirect responsibility for the Isandhlwana massacre, but he was never given another field command.



A trooper named Charlie Sparks who rode out of camp with a companion found himself suddenly alone when his friend disappeared back into the fight to find his horse's bit. "What a choking off I'll get," he said as he rode off to his death, "if the Sergeant Major sees me riding with a snaffle." Arriving safely at the river, Sparks came across another trooper, who was calmly sitting on the bank draining the water from his boots. Sparks found fresh horses for them both and they escaped to safety.

Back in the camp, the orgy of destruction had spent itself. The dead defenders were disembowelled by the Zulus, who, as they moved among the tents, also dispatched their own desperately wounded comrades with a merciful thrust under the left armpit. They carried off the bodies of their dead and dragged away the guns. Then, satisfied that they had fulfilled the demands of their great fighting traditions, they streamed away to their kraals, leaving only a few of their number, befuddled with alcohol, to share the camp with the British dead. Of the 1,800 men in the camp that morning, perhaps 55 Europeans and some 300 Natal Natives survived at dusk.

The Zulu nation, too, had suffered fearful losses – at least 2,000. "An assegai has been thrust into the belly of the nation," said Cetshwayo, when he heard the news. "There are not enough tears to mourn for the dead." And the day's toll was not yet over.

Chelmsford, summoned by a survivor, started back across the plain late in the afternoon. He came up to the camp at dark, scarcely able to credit what had happened, and spent a sleepless night in the midst of the carnage. He was further dismayed by distant rifle-fire and a conflagration across the river in Natal.

The outpost at Rorke's Drift was under attack.

Chelmsford had left "B" Company of the 2/24th under Lieutenant Gonville Bromhead – who was partially deaf – to guard Rorke's Drift with the Natal

THIRD EDITION.
WYLD'S
MILITARY SKETCH
OF
ZULU LAND
THE
TRANSVAAL
AND
ADJOINING TERRITORIES.
James Wyld, Geographer to the Queen.
Bush & Forest Districts
The figures indicate the Height in feet
Scale of English Miles
Longitude 32° East from Greenwich
TRANSVAAL
ZULU LAND
SWAZI COUNTRY
UTRECHT
WAKKERSTROOM
NATAL
ORANGE FREE STATE
INDIAN OCEAN
MIDDELBURG
WESSELSTROOM
Newcastle
Ladysmith
Greytown
PIETER MARITZBURG
DURBAN PORT NATAL
Richmond
ULUNDI
St. Lucia Bay
Pongola River
Usutu River
Amersfoort
Colenso
Estcourt
Pinetown
Umgeni R.
TUGELA R.

Natives and 84 Europeans. Another 36 men were hospital patients in the 11 rooms of the crude mud-brick-and-thatch farmhouse which, with a stone storehouse now crammed with mealie-bags and biscuit-crates, formed the tiny mission station the troops had commandeered.

Late the previous afternoon two exhausted riders had reached the Drift, where Lieutenant John Chard, Royal Engineers, was working on the banks. They gasped out the news of Isandhlwana, and, before riding on to safety, added that a wing of the Zulu *impi*, 4,000 strong, who had taken no part in the battle, was heading for the outpost, and a few of them had rifles. Chard rushed back, to find that Bromhead, already alerted, was trying to load the sick into wagons for a retreat. Chard (who was senior to Bromhead) saw that the garrison, encumbered by ox-wagons, could not get away; he had no choice but to stand and fight.

Using the stored bags and crates, his men ran a low wall around the buildings, incorporating two of the wagons into the back wall to save time. Cross-walls were built as second lines of defence. It was too late to get the sick out of the farmhouse; Chard posted volunteers in each room who barricaded themselves in and knocked loopholes through the walls.

The Zulus, meanwhile, had forded the fast-flowing Buffalo River by linking arms and charging the current in line, so that the weight of those behind carried the leaders over. Then they broke into a run and emerged from a hill into the sight of those at the mission station.

At the last moment, with the Zulus upon them, a company of the Natal Natives and another company of mounted natives who had escaped from Isandhlwana fled, leaving Chard with fewer than 90 hale men to defend his skimpy, extended ramparts.

The Zulus attacked towards sunset, and the ensuing battle was to last until the early morning hours, as wave after wave of Zulus threw themselves at the walls. Chard had opened his ammunition crates before the fight started, and the chaplain, George Smith, worked to bring load after load of cartridges to the hard-pressed defenders, exhorting the men with Biblical phrases and sternly reproving every blasphemy he heard.

The attacks soon forced Chard to abandon the perimeter walls of mealie-bags and biscuit-tins and withdraw behind the second line of defences. This left the hospital building totally exposed to the Zulus, who dashed forward and flattened themselves against the walls, out of reach of the rifle-fire from the narrow loopholes. While the men inside reloaded, the Zulus fired through the holes or threw themselves against the barricaded doors. The front of the building could clearly not be held for long.

Inside, two men, Privates Henry Hook and John Williams, retreated along the series of five rooms away from the Zulus, chopping holes for themselves through the inner walls with a pickaxe, and dragging the wounded behind them. Not all escaped. When the Zulus broke down one door, Williams, looking through the escape hole, saw one of his friends thrown down and disembowelled by assegais.

It took half an hour before Williams could break through to the last room at the corner of the hospital, time enough for the encircling Zulus to set the roof on fire. The hospital would have to be abandoned. The 11 patients were to be lifted through a small window and somehow made to run or be carried over an undefended patch of ground to the new barricade. Nine of them made it. Of the two who died, one was assegaied as he tottered across the gap, another was delirious and refused to leave. He was speared in his bed. Elsewhere in the hospital, two other men, driven out by the flames, threw open the doors of the rooms they had been guarding, sprinted out, dodged between surprised Zulus, dived over the abandoned barricade and hid in bushes.

The battle surged on in the light of the burning roof. Over-used gun barrels glowed in the dark, their heat firing off rounds before the defenders had time to pull the trigger. The men lost all count of the charges and all sense of time. They existed in a slow eternity of noise and smoke and flashes, of straining black faces that rose out of the darkness, danced briefly in the light of the muzzle blasts, and then sank back out of sight. It was after midnight when the rushes began to subside, and after two o'clock in the morning when the last charge was over.

The Zulus, abandoning direct assault, settled down under cover, behind their own dead, behind rocks, or behind the old perimeter barricades, while those with rifles sniped away by the light of the burning hospital. Two hours later, the hospital fire finally flickered out, and the Zulu fire died away with it. Darkness, and a strange uneasy silence descended over the battle-scene as both sides waited for dawn, still an hour and a half away.

As dawn broke, the men, their eyes reddened, their hands blistered and black with powder, strained to see their enemies. From the smouldering ruins of the hospital, across the scattering of bags and tins, 500 Zulu dead were stiffening in the grey light. But the Zulu regiments had departed. Exhaustion had set in: the warriors had not eaten since leaving Ulundi four days before. The previous day alone, they had run five miles to Isandhlwana and then 12 miles on to Rorke's Drift to fight a six-hour battle.

Chelmsford and his men came up soon after, to find 15 of the garrison dead and two more dying, eight wounded and barely 70 men still on their feet. For their parts in the battle, 11 men, including Chard and Bromhead, were awarded the Victoria Cross.

The rest of the war was anticlimactic. Chelmsford was back where he started. He sent for reinforcements, planned a second invasion and started out as soon as he had replaced his transport and the massive reinforcements began to arrive. Slowly and methodically, leaving nothing to chance, he worked his way in towards Ulundi.

One incident marred success: the Prince Imperial of France, the son of the deposed Napoleon III, who had been living in England and was serving as a volunteer on Chelmsford's staff, was killed. Out on patrol, he was caught in an ambush and died fighting. He was popular in London and his death caused more of a flurry in England than Isandhlwana itself had.

The cabinet lost its nerve and as a sop to public opinion sent out Sir Garnet Wolseley to supersede Chelmsford.

Before he could take up his new position, however, Chelmsford marched a gigantic hollow square of troops up to the royal kraal at Ulundi and on July 4, 1879, smashed the final, despairing Zulu charge. Cetshwayo fled, the war was over and the Zulu Empire, which had lasted for 50 years, disappeared into history.

The three British columns (arrowed) that invaded Zululand in 1879 aimed for Cetshwayo's capital at Ulundi. To reach it they had to move north-east from Natal and cross a terrain made up of steep escarpments and rolling hills divided by torrential rivers – all easily defensible by swift-moving Zulu regiments.

THE BREAKING OF THE ZULUS

The plight of these last survivors of the 24th Foot at Isandhlwana was compounded by a monstrous blunder - inability to get at ammunition boxes containing 500,000 rounds. Unable to fire, the British were overwhelmed.

On January 22, 1879, the Zulus smashed a British force at Isandhlwana in one of the worst defeats suffered by Imperial troops in the 19th Century. British honour was retrieved that day only by the heroic defence of a near-by missionary station at Rorke's Drift. Six months later, the British invaded again, grimly determined to erase the defeat and finally crush the Zulus.

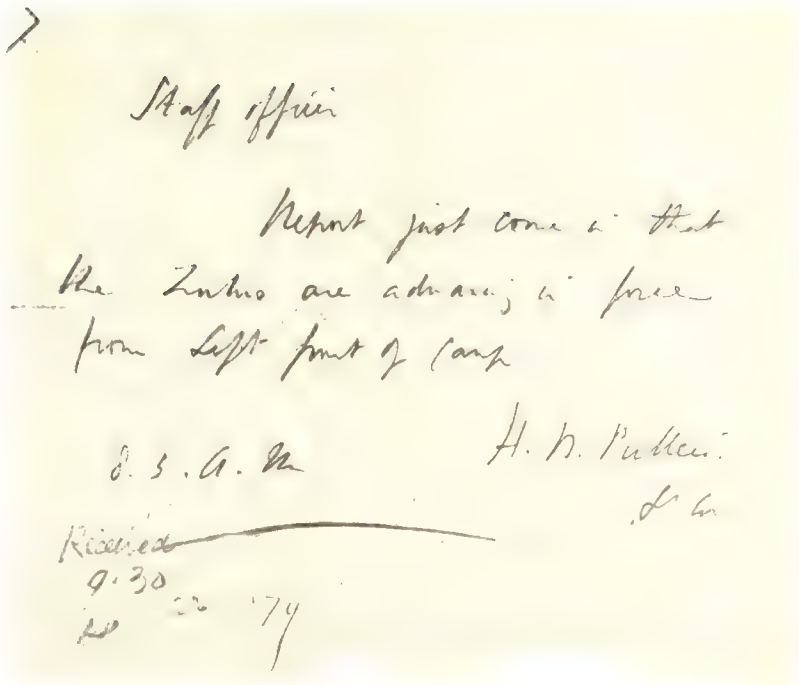
A Dash in Vain

One of the three British columns that invaded Zululand in 1879 crossed the border at Rorke's Drift and was promptly trapped some distance on by thousands of Zulus at Isandhlwana. As the yelling warriors hacked the force to pieces, Colonel Henry Pulleine of the 24th Foot decided to save the honour of his regiment by sending off its Colours to fly another day. He ordered two of his ablest lieutenants – Nevill Coghill and Teignmouth Melvill – to carry the 1st Battalion's standard to safety in Natal.

With Melvill holding the flag aloft the two men cut their way out of the mêlée and galloped for the border with Natal which ran along the Buffalo River four miles away. They struggled through the roaring waters that drowned out the noise of the distant battle, where their comrades were desperately, and unsuccessfully, fighting for their lives.

Melvill lost the standard when he was swept from his horse into the river, there to be joined by Coghill whose horse was shot dead. When the exhausted men began to struggle up the bank, a band of warriors leaped from the water and stabbed them to death.

Meanwhile 900 disembowelled British corpses were stiffening in the hot sun at Isandhlwana as the Zulu whirlwind swept on towards the little garrison guarding the mission-station at Rorke's Drift.



A laconic message from Colonel Pulleine at Isandhlwana to forward troops shows he was unaware that the entire Zulu army was about to pounce.

Zulu warriors plunge through a river on their way to Rorke's Drift. They had been held in reserve during the day and were thirsting for blood.

Coghill and Melvill (right) cut down frenzied Zulu assailants as they charge away from the battle of Isandhlwana in an attempt to save the Colour and the honour of the 24th Foot.

A Heroic Stand

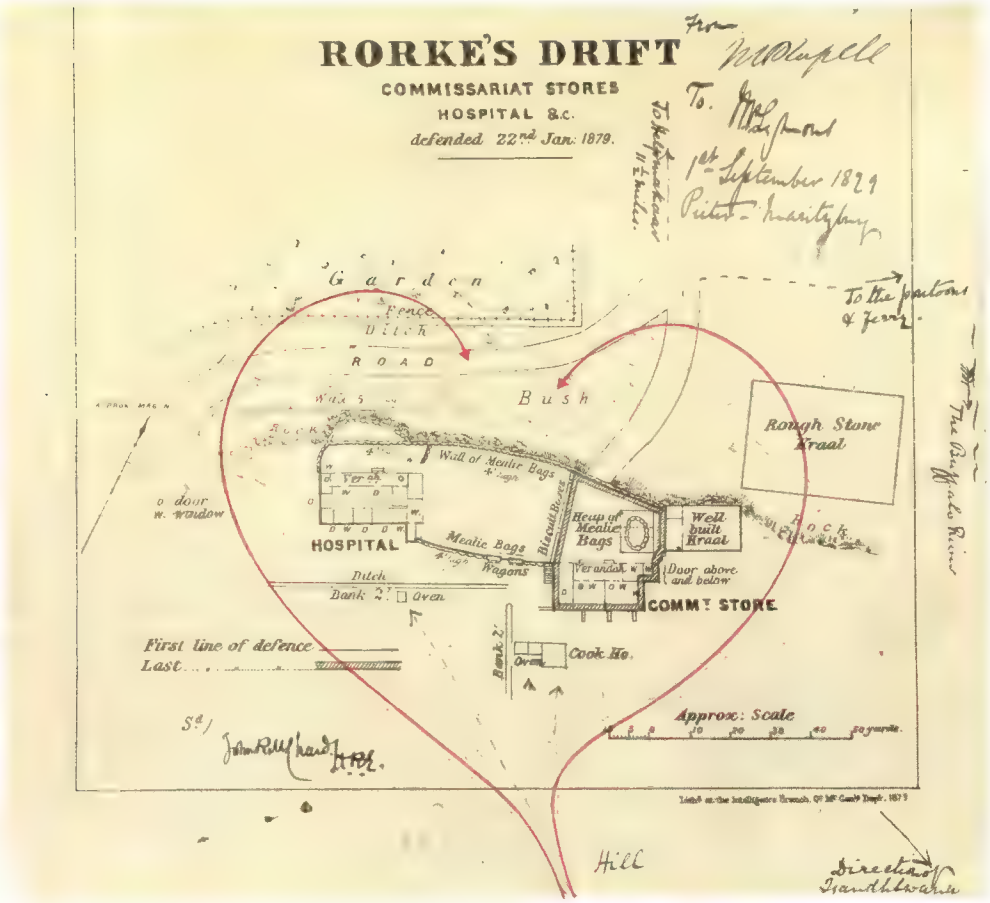
The British troops in the old mission station at Rorke's Drift had only time to throw up a low wall of grain-filled sacks before a yelling mass of Zulus fell on them. For the next six hours the tiny outpost echoed to the crash of rifle-fire and blood-curdling war cries as 4,000 warriors tried to overwhelm the 104 defenders and their commander, Lieutenant John Chard of the Royal Engineers.

Again and again waves of Zulus – "as black as Hell and as thick as grass" – thundered up to the breastwork of sacks and tried to stab and hack their way past. But the 80 men of "B" Company, 2nd Battalion, the 24th Foot under Lieutenant Bromhead held their ground flinging back the furious assaults with bullet, butt and bayonet.

When the dawn broke and a relief force got through to the haggard defenders, 17 were dead and 370 Zulus lay in blood-spattered heaps around Rorke's Drift. For their bravery, 11 of the defenders won Victoria Crosses – the largest number ever awarded for a single action, seven of the coveted awards going to the real heroes of the action – the valiant men of the 24th Foot.

This V.C. was awarded to Commissariat Officer James Dalton, who, though severely wounded, fearlessly moved about maintaining morale.

At the height of the battle Lieutenant Chard (centre) jabs a finger towards a gap in the defences at Rorke's Drift and orders Bromhead to plug it with some of his men.



Lieutenant Chard's sketch map of Rorke's Drift shows the initial defence perimeter of mealie-bags and wagons, which steadily shrank as the Zulus (red outline) tightened their grip on the beleaguered outpost.

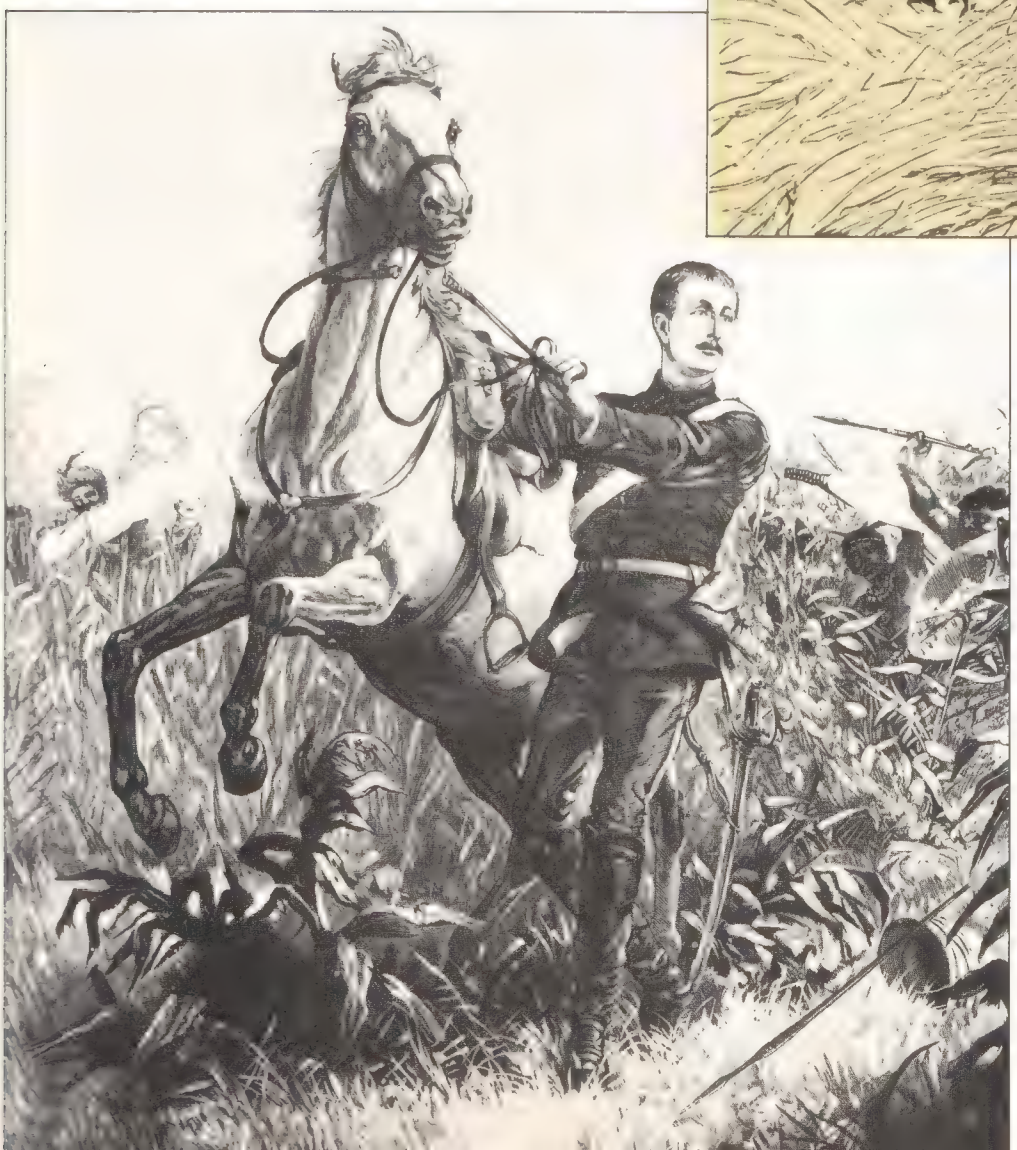
In this *Punch* cartoon (above) Mr. Punch salutes Lieutenants Chard and Bromhead for their gallant defence of Rorke's Drift. They have, he says, preserved Natal from a Zulu invasion and saved the "credit of Old England." Chard (right) was later invited to Balmoral by Queen Victoria.

The Death of a Prince

The news of the massacre at Isandhlwana shocked Britain. Five months later the death of one young man, Napoleon III's son, the Prince Imperial, somehow seemed even more horrifying. Young Louis Bonaparte had captured the country's heart after he fled to England with his mother, Empress Eugénie, following France's disastrous defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. He was a gay, high-spirited youth much given to practical jokes. Ever since graduating from the military academy at Woolwich, however, time had hung heavily on his hands and when the Zulu War broke out he begged to be allowed to fight. Disraeli, fearful of offending Republican France by acceding to the wishes of a young Bonaparte prince, allowed him to go only as an observer.

Louis, however, had other ideas. He wheedled his way on to reconnaissance patrols and on June 1, 1879, rode into hostile country with a few men. Just as the party was saddling up after lunch, Zulus hidden in the long grass fired a volley from their rifles. The Prince's horse shied violently and he was thrown to the ground. He got up swiftly and began to run, but the Zulus caught up with him and stabbed him to death. Queen Victoria, who had a great fondness for royal exiles, was stunned by the news of his death. She was the leading figure at the mournful ceremony – attended by 40,000 – when Louis was laid to rest in Chislehurst, Kent, alongside his father.

Burly lancers gently lift the dead Prince Imperial to a makeshift stretcher of horse blankets and lances. Many of the battle-toughened cavalrymen wept when they saw the 17 assegai wounds that disfigured his body.



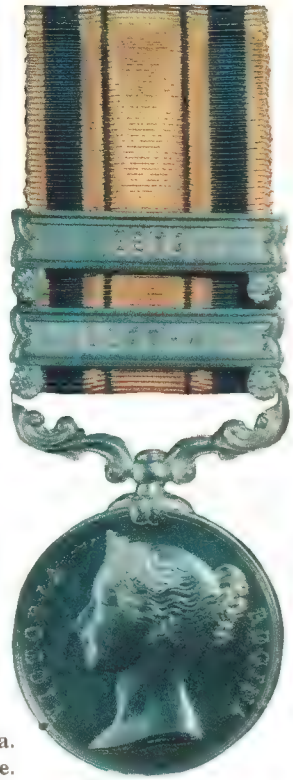
The Prince Imperial struggles to control his terrified horse as a band of spear-waving Zulus rush towards him. Just as he was about to mount, the stirrup strap broke and he rolled off and under the horse. From that moment, his death was assured.

An ambulance draped with the Tricolour and Union Jack carries the Prince Imperial's body to Durban past a line of mourning soldiers.

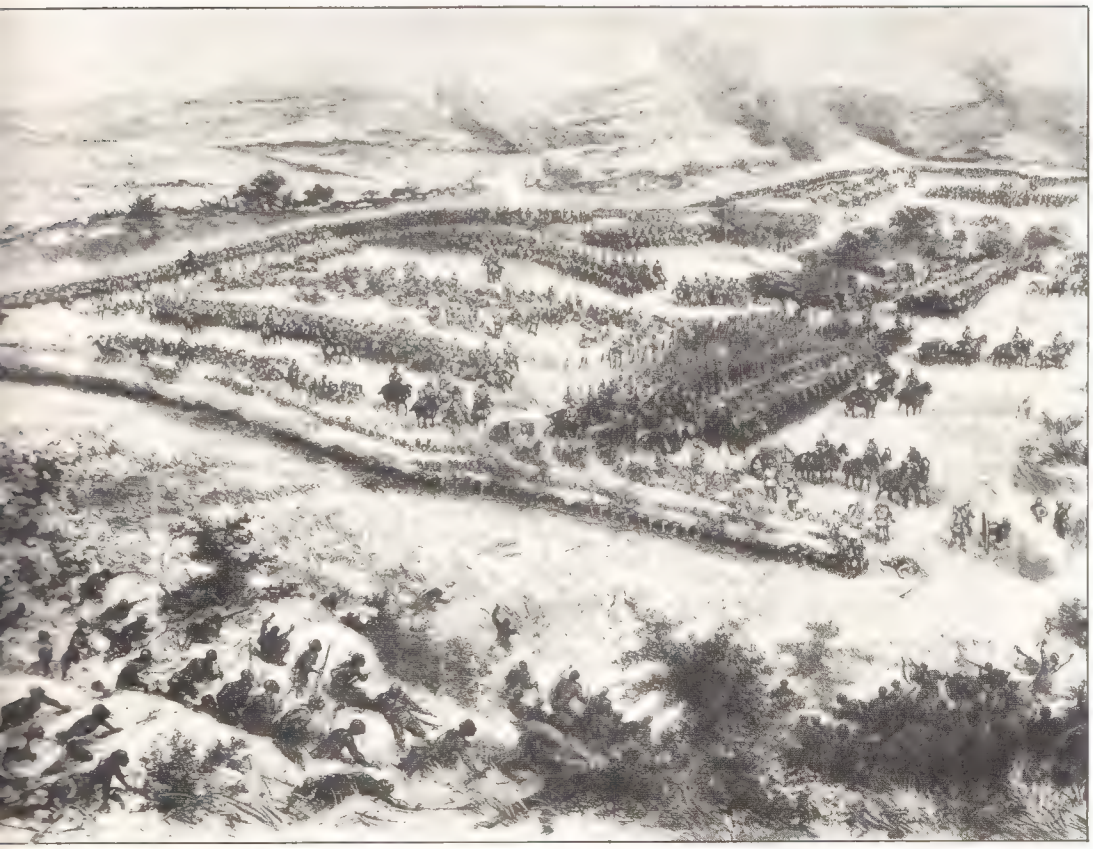
The Flames of Revenge

Britain's determination to avenge Isandhlwana hardened into an iron resolve with the death of the Prince Imperial. Late in June a reinforced army of 17,500 men struck out for Cetshwayo's capital at Ulundi. On July 4, a mile and a half west of the royal kraal, the British force formed a classic square formation and braced itself for attack from the 20,000 Zulus who gathered in a vast crescent and then advanced at a jog to their last great battle.

Not a single man got within 30 yards of the British lines. A hail of lead from rifles and Gatling guns scythed down wave after wave of screaming warriors. "Their noble ardour," wrote a war correspondent smugly, "could not endure in the face of the appliances of civilized warfare." When the fury of the Zulu attack faltered, the 17th Lancers charged out of the square to deliver the final blow, the horsemen impaling warriors on their lances as they galloped along. The terrified natives broke into headlong flight leaving 1,000 dead on the battlefield. Fifty years earlier, Shaka, founder of the nation, had predicted his country would be "trodden flat by the feet of a great white people." His prophecy had come tragically true.



Medals were awarded for various actions in South Africa. This one includes an "1879" bar for Zulu war service.



A long cloud of gunsmoke bursts from the British square at Ulundi. The infantry on the right face has been marched aside to let the 17th Lancers charge the Zulu mass.

British soldiers gaze at Cetshwayo's blazing "palace" in Ulundi after smashing the Zulu army and setting the capital alight. Tales of treasure in this single-storey hut proved false: disappointed officers searching the building found only gin bottles, old newspapers and a box of boot brushes.

II. The Boers Rebel

By Brian Gardner

The killing of a Zulu "wasp" by the British lion in this 1879 cartoon warns off the truculent Boers – who were, ironically, soon to crush the British.

The dispatch of Sir Garnet Wolseley to South Africa had met with enthusiastic public approval. There was no greater hero in public estimation. He had dealt with troublesome natives before – the Ashantis of West Africa in 1873 – and no one was more likely to restore imperial honour. Soon everything would be "All Sir Garnet," a flattering phrase of the moment, synonymous with all being well (for the Empire).

Wolseley was appointed to the rank of general, given supreme power as military commander, and made High Commissioner for south-east Africa. The latter post gave him control over Natal, Zululand, and the Transvaal. Chelmsford was to remain as second-in-command. Sir Bartle Frere, thought by liberals responsible for the war, was demoted to High Commissioner of Cape Colony.

It was almost uncanny. No sooner had the legendary Sir Garnet set foot in South Africa than the Zulu hordes began to retreat. As a verse in *Punch* had it;

When Wolseley's mentioned, Wellesley's brought to mind;
Two men, two names, of answerable kind:
Call to the front, like Wellesley, good at need,
Go, Wolseley, and like Wellesley, greatly speed.

Speed he did, but Sir Garnet found that his authority carried less weight at the front than *Punch* suggested. The great victory of July 4 had been completed by Chelmsford in disregard to Wolseley's vociferous messages: "Concentrate your force immediately and keep it concentrated." "Undertake no operations with detached bodies of troops. Acknowledge receipt of this message at once." For weeks, Chelmsford would not even recognize Wolseley's superior authority in the field. When he tried to open negotiations with Cetshwayo, Chelmsford ignored Wolseley and communicated directly with London.

After final victory over the Zulus, Chelmsford's behaviour further condemned him. No effort was made to pursue the beaten Zulu contingents. Ulundi was entered, burned, and the British returned to their camp. Where was Cetshwayo? If he went uncaptured, could the war still be considered over? Lord Chelmsford thought so. To the amazement of the government, of Wolseley, and of the Zulus, Lord Chelmsford began to withdraw. The Prime Minister told the bewildered Queen that it was the general's "last and crowning mistake."

Wolseley at first surprisingly took

Chelmsford's side: he declined to send the army wandering about Zulu territory looking for the defeated king. He expected Cetshwayo to come in of his own accord, unless "some kind friend will run an assegai through him." But after several weeks, when there was no sign of Cetshwayo, Wolseley denounced Chelmsford's "stupidity in not staying there after the fight," and ordered the chief to be hunted down. It took 17 days of carefully planned military operations to find him. Cetshwayo was marched to Ulundi, now Wolseley's advance headquarters, with a large escort.

It was at this time that Cetshwayo acquired a curious reputation that was to last through his captivity and his subsequent visit to England. Reports spoke of his "manly bearing," his "splendid appearance," his "fine physique," of his being "every inch a king." It seemed that the British, always adept at self-deception, had some need to exaggerate their enemy's characteristics thus. In fact, as photographs clearly show, despite his handsome features and dignity when clothed, Cetshwayo was a corpulent, heavily-breasted man, of singularly unattractive appearance when unclothed.

Cetshwayo was kept in a tent, under heavy guard. Through an interpreter, he protested to Wolseley that circumstances had been well beyond his control. He had always wanted peace, he said, but the war had been forced upon him. Wolseley was unimpressed, and lectured him on his misdeeds for almost an hour. Relieving Cetshwayo of his necklace of lions' claws, which he mailed home as a souvenir, Wolseley sent the chief south. Cetshwayo reached Cape Town, and was confined in Cape Town Castle.

Chelmsford returned home in near disgrace. Disraeli refused to see him, and although he received the Knight Grand Cross of the Bath (G.C.B.) as a consolation, he was never again granted a command out of the country. The Zulu War had, after all, cost the British over £5,000,000 and 2,400 soldiers had died.

Wolseley received the submission of nearly all the Zulu chiefs at Ulundi. He told them that he had decided to split up the country into 13 districts, each under a chief advised by European officials. In this way, he hoped to keep Zulu power at bay. The government and Press at home were well-pleased with his "Zululand for the Zulus" policy.

Sir Bartle Frere, however, favoured a policy of strong control, and he made no secret of it. "Sir Bottle Beer," as Wolseley called his *bête noire*, was soon proved right. The 13 chiefs began squabbling among themselves, and the new system of administration started to disintegrate.

Uncertain as to what to do with Cetshwayo, the British ordered the deposed king to be shipped to London so that the government (and indeed the enthralled public) could have a look at him. He was set up in a rented house in Kensington, and taken on tours of the capital, which naturally astonished him. Every morning he appeared on the balcony of his house in Medbury Road, where a small crowd had assembled to cheer him. He had left Africa in a loincloth, but was now seen in London in a smart suit. He took to European clothes well, and his spirits began to revive.

The Queen invited him to lunch and found the occasion "enjoyable." She gave the victor of Isandhlwana a silver goblet. The Prince of Wales presented him with a walking-stick. It was decided that Wolseley's plan was not a success: Cetshwayo should be restored to his throne. Puzzled, no doubt, by the strange behaviour of his enemies, Cetshwayo sailed for South Africa.

There, a mounted guard trotted with him into Zululand, back to his old capital. The new rulers of the principalities could hardly be expected to welcome his return, and they did not. What had seemed a good idea in London, meant further bloodshed and chaos in Zululand.

THE LADIES' MAN.

LADIES, ladies, rush to meet him,
Clasp him in your snowy arms!
With sweet salutations greet him,
Daze him with your matchless charms!

Eyes like his, so bright and screwy,
Dart wild glances, full of bliss;
Lips like his, so plump and dewy,
Are fit cushions for a kiss.

White young dandies, get away, O!
You are now 'neath beauty's ban;
Clear the field for CETEWAYO,
He alone's the ladies' man.

When Cetshwayo visited England in 1882, he drew curious and admiring crowds everywhere he went. His virile good looks prompted some light-heartedly abandoned verse (left). The Queen invited him for an audience, at which he made a dignified appearance (below).

Commemorative silver, like this Royal Engineers' dish-stand, was commissioned by many of the regiments that had fought in the Zulu wars.

Sir Evelyn Wood was remarkably accident-prone – he was once trampled by a giraffe – but he survived wars against Zulus and Boers to become a respected administrator.

Cetshwayo was defeated in a battle in which over 4,000 Zulus died – more than in the war with the British, but about which little is known. He lost his valued mementoes of his London visit to his flames and died in 1884. The officiating medical officer attributed his death to "fatty disease of the heart," but expressed the private view that the obese, 57-year-old chief had been poisoned, a suggestion never further examined.

Three years later, Zululand was finally annexed to the Crown, all hope of maintaining it as a quasi-independent vassal state having been abandoned. The Zulu warriors became labourers and houseboys on Natal estates. Wolseley's problems in this area were at an end.

But meanwhile, more serious trouble had arisen in the Transvaal, taken over by the British in 1877. The Zulu threat had temporarily held the bitterness of the Boer inhabitants in check, but with the Zulus crushed, they felt there was no further reason for the British to remain in control. The neighbouring Orange Free State was still independent. Why were they not?

One of the leaders rallying support for the re-establishment of the republic was a certain Paul Kruger: an untidy-looking man, with hunched shoulders, extensive, wispy beard, black clothing, and a large, floppy hat. The British were convinced Kruger was a malevolent rabble-raiser, blinded by religious cant. But to his own people, he was a noble patriot, struggling for the rights of an oppressed race.

When rumours of a Boer uprising became persistent, Wolseley decided that a visit to Pretoria, the Transvaal capital, was imperative. As he progressed into the erstwhile republic, Sir Garnet left the Boers in no doubt as to his policy. At selected places *en route* he told the assembled crowds, as if he were speaking to ignorant natives: "So long as the sun shines, the Transvaal will remain British territory." This was by no means the view held everywhere in London, but Wolseley, having made the initiative, received government support. The "infernal Boers," as Wolseley called them, greeted him at Pretoria with banners and petitions calling for independence. Kruger collected the signatures of 80 per cent of the electorate in support of his demands.

At this point Wolseley was distracted by the political situation at home. He was anxious to receive some honour before the Conservative Prime Minister Disraeli fell – as then seemed likely in the wake of Isandhlwana and other imperial crises – and was replaced by the Liberal, and anti-imperialist, Gladstone. No "wretched G.C.B." would be acceptable, he said, for had not "that failure Chelmsford" received one? A peerage would be in order. Disraeli, he confided, would be a fool if he did not grasp the "opportunity of associating his name with mine." He suggested to his wife, in England, that she "devise some plan for it."

Wolseley added to his claims by brilliantly, if brutally, disposing of another military problem. The Bapedi tribe, autonomous in a remote corner of the Transvaal, had long retained an aggressive independence and had, indeed, already undertaken one war against the Boers, only to be driven back into their own area. Now they threatened war again. Wolseley assembled a "Transvaal Field Force" of 1,400 British infantry, 400 colonial horse, and 10,000 friendly Africans. There followed, in Wolseley's own words, "a filthy little war," conducted with typical Wolseley efficiency and flair. It had the sort of challenges Wolseley always enjoyed: over 500 miles from the nearest sea-base, Durban; an advance into a depopulated, little-known area; Wolseley in the thick of the fighting, "uncommonly glad" as one of his staff disconsolately recorded, "to partake of a generous nip from my flask." The Bapedi were almost exterminated.

The Boers were impressed. Wolseley was received in Pretoria after the campaign in some awe. But few could help noting that with the power of the Zulu and Bapedi destroyed, the British presence in the Transvaal was not really necessary any longer. Boer discontent increased. In open defiance of the High Commissioner, nearly 3,000 men assembled on the veld under the flag of the republic. "I feel I could walk over them easily," Wolseley told his wife. He assured the government that there was little, if anything, to worry about. He told the Colonial Office that the Boers were prepared "to renounce all further disturbing action, and to return to the peaceful cares of their rural life."

The government was inclined to believe him. At long last, Wolseley got the order to go home. So anxious was he to get away from the country that he so detested that he travelled the fantastic distance of more than 300 miles in three days at the gallop, exchanging horses every few miles and galloping most of the way. Arriving in Natal, he looked more dead than alive. When he got to London, he found that the only award he was to receive was the despised G.C.B. (which he had turned down six years previously). In the same year, 1880, Gladstone's Liberal government displaced Disraeli and the Conservatives.

Gladstone had already described the annexation of the Transvaal as "dishonourable," but, in office, he found it impossible to extricate Britain from its difficult position. "The Queen cannot be advised," he admitted, "to relinquish her sovereignty over the Transvaal." Nevertheless, he dismissed Wolseley. Gladstone, deeply immersed in a solution for what he considered the insoluble Irish problem, which he hoped would be his greatest contribution to political life, forgot about South Africa altogether. He was soon to be reminded of it in an unmistakable fashion.

Wolseley's replacement was Major-General Sir George Colley, a 45-year-old whose reputation was based on a brilliant career at Sandhurst and Staff College. Colley was considered one of the army's leading military academics. Like Wolseley, he was a Dubliner. Wolseley considered him "the best instructed soldier I ever met." He thought highly of his "good sense and sound judgment." Colley was delighted with the appointment. He told his wife: "That extraordinary run of luck seems to accompany me in everything, and at times almost frightens me."

Discontent in the Transvaal broke into open disturbance at the small town of Potchefstroom in December, 1880. It was over a matter of £27 tax. A local magistrate seized the wagon of a Boer named Piet Bezuidenhout to pay the costs of an action in which the Boer was involved. Just before it was due to be sold by public auction, Piet Cronje, who later became

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Dinuzulu, (centre), Cetshwayo's son and successor, was tightly controlled by a white Council, shown here. Their task was an easy one: Dinuzulu spent 17 years of his 29-year "reign" in prison after small-scale Zulu rebellions against white encroachment.

Men of a British patrol stare at Majuba Hill in blank disbelief as their comrades stream down its steep slopes to escape the victorious Boers.

MAJUBA

At dawn on February 27, 1881, 365 British soldiers staggered on to the summit of Majuba Hill in Natal in the last and most disastrous bid to relieve garrisons trapped in the Transvaal by a Boer insurrection. From the 6,000-foot hill they hoped to blast the turbulent burghers out of their strongpoint at Laing's Nek and break through to the rescue. But appalling errors doomed the British to defeat.

Nobody troubled to dig in or fortify any of the hillocks that studded the summit. Then a force of some 1,000 Boers opened a heavy covering fire. The British force, pinned to the ground, was unable to follow the movements of the enemy assault parties. Consequently, when 180 Boers burst over the crest of the hill they took the British completely by surprise. With no defensive positions to fall back on, the dumbfounded men were quickly isolated and picked off. The survivors fled for their lives, leaving behind 93 dead and 133 wounded. To the British Commander-in-Chief Majuba was placed on a par with Isandhlwana as a "rout . . . almost unparalleled in the long annals of our Army." Afterwards, the Highlanders were said to have panicked, but an officer in the burial party recorded that "all were shot in the chest" and none in the back.

The Boers kept up a murderously accurate covering fire at Majuba so that assault groups could claw their way up the north face of the hill unobserved and seize the summit.

Gordon Highlanders, Northamptons and sailors flee down Majuba Hill under a hail of bullets after being swept from the top by a furious Boer attack that utterly broke their nerve.

A British soldier reels backwards with a bullet in his head, victim of the withering Boer fire at Majuba.

one of the most famous of the Boer military leaders, and a band of burghers seized the wagon and handed it back to its owner. This was an act of defiance that could not be ignored by the British, and the Boers, realizing the significance of their action, used the affair as the excuse for longed-for rebellion. Five days later, they proclaimed a republic.

Colley, surprisingly, was bewildered. "I cannot conceive," he said, "what can have so suddenly caused the Boers to act as they have." There was nothing sudden about it, but before Colley could ponder any further, the whole province had risen in arms against British rule, as it had been threatening to do for years. The scattered British garrisons in the Transvaal soon found themselves besieged in outposts all round the territory.

Colley sent a column of 235 redcoats from Natal up to Pretoria. It was Christmas week, 1880. The men of the Connaught Rangers marched confidently along the track, the band playing "Kiss Me Mother, Kiss Your Darling Daughter" until the column was shot to pieces by hidden Boer riflemen. Within a few minutes, more than half the Connaughts were dead or wounded on the road; the remainder gave in. The Boers had lost two men. In imperial terms, there was only one answer to such an outrage against British authority: war.

Sir George Colley's opponents did not seem, at first sight, very impressive. They consisted of irregulars, who accepted little discipline, and did not even wear a uniform. Military decisions were made only after long discussions, at which everyone could have a say. What was less well known was that they were expert shots, and that, bred in their bones from participation in wars against the natives, was an instinctive knowledge of the tactics suitable to local conditions.

Colley decided to advance into the Transvaal with a column of some 1,000 men and six field pieces. He travelled up the main route from Natal, through the difficult passes of the Drakensberg mountains. The Boers watched his progress and dug in at a place called Laing's Nek. Colley decided to take them on. A detachment of British infantry, in perfect line, went forward to dislodge the enemy. The order to fix bayonets was given, and then "Charge!" The Boers unloosed a withering fusillade. Nearly all the British officers, their swords glinting in the sunlight, fell at once, one of them calling "*Floreat Etona!*" (Long live Eton!) as he died. Only a few of the troops managed to reach the Boer position, and they were recalled by one of the few surviving officers. Of the 480 men engaged, 150 did not return. The Boers were evidently more formidable than they looked.

The author Rider Haggard, who was farming not far away, wrote of Laing's Nek: "What Sir George Colley's real object was in exposing himself to the attack has never transpired. It can hardly have been to clear the road, as he says in his despatch, because the road was not held by the enemy, but only visited occasionally by their patrols. The result of the battle was to make the Boers, whose losses were trifling, more confident than ever, and to greatly depress our soldiers. Sir George had now lost between three and four hundred men out of his entire column of little over a thousand, which was thereby entirely crippled." One soldier wrote of Colley: "A more charming and courteous man you could not meet, but he ought not to be trusted with a corporal's guard."

General Colley was shocked by this set-back. He was in a difficult position, because furious political activity was taking place in London to stop the war before it got out of hand, and he had no idea what the political moves were. He was further nonplussed when a supply column, guarded by some 300 infantry, was ambushed and destroyed. "It is altogether too sad," Colley wrote to his wife.

In London, negotiations had been opened with Pretoria. It seemed that the Boers were in a strong position and Gladstone, engrossed in Ireland, had no real wish to force a show-down. General Colley decided that a British victory was essential before a political settlement was reached which would leave imperial honour and his own reputation shattered beyond repair.

One hill, Majuba, dominated all the

John Bull, suitably clad for South African campaigning, comments to a Highlander on the debacle at Majuba that "fighting isn't quite the sort of work that can be done in that rig." The truth went deeper: John Bull had ill prepared all his men to meet the determined, skilful Boers.

Laing's Nek area. From it the Boer lines were clearly visible and their flank endangered; if it were taken, the enemy might well be obliged to withdraw without firing another shot. Colley assembled his force, about 600 strong, at night. Security was so intense that many of the officers did not know of his intentions. Colley sat in his tent and wrote to his wife: "I am going out tonight to try and seize the Majuba Hill, which commands the right of the Boer position, and leave this behind in case I should not return. . . . How I wish I could believe the stories of meeting again hereafter."

It was a steep climb to the summit of Majuba, through a lot of scrub and loose stone. But by dawn, the last of the troops had reached the top. They watched as the Boers moved about below. Colley, in a pair of white tennis shoes, surveyed the scene with satisfaction. "We could stay here forever," he remarked, and his confidence led to behaviour that, for a commander, was extraordinary. No order was given to dig in or to haul up the artillery. The troops lay about resting.

Below, the Boer commander called for volunteers to storm the hill. He had little hope of taking it, but plenty of men came forward nevertheless. About 180 Boers were chosen and began the climb. Colley turned down a suggestion that defences should now be dug. Satisfied that all was well, he lay down and went to sleep.

The Boers advanced slowly, from boulder to boulder, from rock to rock. The British riflemen had the greatest difficulty in locating them. To several officers it was plain that marksmanship in the Army was sadly lacking. The advancing Boers arrived at the plateau together and in force. The redcoats gathered in defensive positions, rather than trying to hold the perimeter, which tactic in any case was too late. Sir George was awakened. Fierce hand to hand fighting took place, as the British struggled to maintain their positions, and were picked off one by one as the Boer riflemen themselves took cover. The Boer fire was incredibly accurate. The British firing was wild; hardly a Boer was hit.

Despite exhortations from their officers, the British infantry began to withdraw. As one officer put it: "A general funk had become established." Men began to slide and slither down the slope. Boers stood openly on the edge of the escarpment and picked the British off like wild game. A small party of British remained on the plateau with Sir George. The general, showing great personal bravery, urged on

The Boer Commandant-General "Slim Piet" Joubert was thought to be the most moderate of the Boer leaders – though it was he who decimated the British forces in 1880–81.

his men until he was shot dead. The remainder surrendered. So ended the brief battle of Majuba Hill. Transvaal farmers had defeated British infantry. The British had lost 93 dead and 133 wounded; the Boers, one dead and five wounded.

Thanks to a recently established cable link, the news was received in London the following day. The British public were astounded and the government was furious. How would it affect the peace on which Gladstone was already determined? The Queen wrote: "I do not like peace before we have retrieved our honour." But Gladstone, predictably, was against "shedding more blood." He argued that a generous policy on the Transvaal had already been agreed in cabinet, had been transmitted to the Boers, and a reply was awaited. The defeat should not affect the previously decided policy. "Suppose for argument's sake," he said, "that at the moment when Colley made the unhappy attack . . . there shall turn out to have been decided on, and possibly on its way, a satisfactory or friendly reply from the Boer government."

Gladstone's decision not to seek military revenge, brought the government into some conflict with the Army, where the desire to give the Boers a bloody nose was, understandably, very strong.

Colley's successor was General Sir Evelyn Wood, another protégé of Wolseley. Wood recommended continuing the war. "Considering the disaster we have sustained," he telegraphed, "I think the happiest result will be, that after accelerating successful action . . . the Boers should disperse without any guarantee." Later he wrote: "Now you have so many troops coming I recommend decisive though lenient action; and I can, humanly speaking, promise victory." It was no good. Paul Kruger replied to the British message in conciliatory tones. He had got what he wanted: British military defeat, and a hint of autonomy. There was no need for Gladstone to change his mind.

The Boers agreed to withdraw and to return to their homes. The British agreed not to follow them into the Transvaal. Kruger and his associates were recognized by the British government as the legitimate Boer leaders for the purpose of negotiations. There was a lot of unease about this in England, but Gladstone said: "In the end, we should have been making war upon a very large portion – nay, on the whole – Dutch population of South Africa, which numbers two to one of the English."

The negotiations were concluded in August, 1881, and resulted in the Treaty of Pretoria which recognized the Transvaal's independence, but retained for Britain a vaguely defined "suzerainty" and control of the Transvaal's foreign affairs. It was presented in Britain as a liberal, humanitarian measure giving considerable freedom to a former colony, and in South Africa as a great victory for Boer nationalism over British imperialism.

The Conservative opposition was horrified. They saw the creation of a semi-independent state in the centre of southern Africa as an unacceptable threat to British superiority there.

One of the chief opposition spokesmen, Sir Michael Hicks Beach, a former Colonial Secretary, said of the Liberal government with uncanny prescience: "They have secured not only that peace shall not be lasting, but that it shall be the precursor of infinitely worse trouble than any from which their weak yielding has for the moment delivered them."

The war of 1881 had been a small war, and the Empire was accustomed to small wars. But there was something about this one that had made it quite different. The lion had been humiliated and the Empire threatened in an area where it was expanding most rapidly. One day, the war would have to be fought again.

"Some corner of a foreign field that is forever England": Zulu War dead in a Natal graveyard.

Officer, The 2nd The Queen's Dragoon Guards, 1850

IN NEXT WEEK'S ISSUE

CANADA MAKES GOOD